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ABSTRACT

The PUSH Program for Excellence suggests that parents, neighbors, peers, teachers, church officials, and other adults in the local community must work together to develop motivation and habits which help students to succeed in society's major institutions. However, the weakest element in the PUSH plan involves it relatively slight emphasis on the problems likely to arise in improving curriculum and instruction. If the movement is to contribute to a lasting improvement in big-city schools, it must incorporate specific and systematic school-wide plans for change in curriculum and methods of instruction. These include: (1) appointment of outstanding administrative leadership at every level; (2) a greater emphasis on staff development; (3) an analysis and/or reorganization of traditional school practices; (4) more provisions for different educational environments for students who cannot function well in regular schools; and (5) community resources joined to school resources in order to insure that both are fully utilized. (Author/EB)

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The EXCEL Program for Excellence in Education: An Assessment*

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The EXCEL Program for Excellence in Education: An Assessment

Introduction

For many years educators and parents have been confronted with the dilemma of providing and enhancing public education in the large urban areas of America. More significant to this process, is the current state of affairs relative to improving the quality of education, actually delivered to low income and minority youth, since the May 17, 1954 Brown v. Board of Education[1] decision on school segregation. Although this United States Supreme Court landmark decision overturned the Plessy v. Ferguson[2] doctrine of "separate but equal", rudiments of this phenomenon is still impacting many publics. Further, it is felt that this recently acquired legal access right is still being denied operationally, by methods of court denial.

More recently, we are hearing varying reports relative to the status of education in the urban areas of America, as illustrated by the United States Commission on Civil Rights (1979)[3] and Chase .[4] With the aforementioned in mind, many professionals have sought to dispel the myth that urban education cannot deliver, what education in general has provided for many non-urban dwellers. One such exemplary program, which is addressing itself to this critical issue, is the PUSH for EXCEL program, headed by the Reverend Jesse L. Jackson.

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[1] 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

[2] 163 U.S. 537 (1896).

[3] U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, Status Report on School Desegregation, Washington: U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1979.

[4] Francis S. Chase, "Signs of Renewal in Urban Education," The Urban Review, 10(Winter, 1978), p. 266.

The purpose of this paper is to assess whether or not the EXCEL Program for excellence in education, can become a reality or is it just a dream. The paper is three-fold in nature. It will provide an overview of the program and its strategies; it will provide suggestions as to what various publics can do to assist in improving the quality of education; and it will provide some recommendations to help insure success.

The Program and Strategies

School officials in most U.S. urban areas are admitting wholesale failure in many of their predominately black schools. Discipline is non-existent and dialogue, where present, is leading nowhere. Attempts at making the curriculum relevant to the black experience, hiring black teachers as role models, and involving the black teachers as role models, and involving the black community in decision-making are returning minimal dividends on the amounts invested and are largely overshadowed by the realities of crime, violence, unemployment, and sullen disinterest in government affairs in the black section of the population.[5]

A program for Excellence, is a product of the acronyon for People United to Save Humanity, (PUSH), headed by the Reverend Jesse L. Jackson. The program is presently targeted at the student and community populations of big city school systems. Eaton (1977) suggests that it is attempting to re-assert the dominance of teachers over the students, re-structure a curriculum that had become watered down, and re-institute measures that reward the well behaved and punish the unruly.[6]

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[5]William E. Eaton, "Jesse Jackson and the Urban Social Reform Movement," Urban Education 6(January, 1977), p. 401.

[6]Ibid.

Currently, it is being implemented in Chicago, Kansas City, Los Angeles, and is in the embryonic stage of development in the Indianapolis and other large urban school systems.

Initially, it is important for us to understand what the program is and sometimes that is difficult to discern, because of the magneticism and stature of the leader of the movement. The Excel program is an intervention program intended to bring together the resources of (1) Parents and other community residents, (2) Teachers (3) Preachers, (4) Principals and other school administrators, and (5) Student learners, into an educational team with specified roles but with a common ground; namely, survival.[7] A further definition of the EXCEL program, is the integration of a thrust by this program, to achieve excellence in education. Subsequently, excellence within Watson's (1978) Iexicon of thinking, is defined as: surpassing others: to outdo, to outstrip, to exceed, or to top. It implies being superior in achievement. But the definition also means to be superior to others in some desirable quality. Excellence is synonymous with merit or virtue.[8]

A dominant component of the program is to move the attitudes and motivations of the students in a direction of EXCELLENCE. The program hinges on a renewal of spirit within parents and educators. THE SPIRIT to "push" for quality education for the survival of our young people and our society.

The program recognizes the need for more improved administration and teaching techniques, which can only be accomplished by a renewed spirit of excellence on the part of educators, YOU and ME. Integral to the

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[7] Eugene E. Eubanks and Daniel U. Levine, "The PUSH Program for Excellence in Big-City Schools," Phi Delta Kappan, 58(January, 1977), p. 383.

[8] Bernard C. Watson, "Excellence: What It Is and How Can It Be Achieved," Phi Delta Kappan, 60(November, 1978), p. 207S.

program is a rebirth of the need to stress basic courtesies and respect for authority and authority figures, by students with more intense directive influence, and by parents and other community leaders. WHAT'S SO IRONIC ABOUT THIS PROGRAM, IS THAT IT IS SO OLD THAT IT SOUNDS NEW.

However, there are three major areas of concern, "What has the program promised to deliver?" "Will the product delivered have the impact, or "the push" to effect changes in inner city schools?" and "Will it deliver productive citizens who will have the competence, skills, and the knowledge to break through the many formidable barriers which confront them now and later?"

The massive drop-out of parental involvement in the schools is one of the major causes for trouble in schools. The Excel program calls for the renewal of the responsibility of parents to take a vital role in the education of their children by, mandating and enforcing compulsory study periods for their children after school. Additionally, it calls for support from educators, politicians, the press, disc jockeys, and other persons who influence children and youth, to encourage and reward, publicly, students who achieve to excellency. A special call should go out to disc jockeys, who reach more students than the principals. Children somehow know the top 10 records. They can in some instances recite the lyrics of a song they have only heard twice, and can tell you who is playing base guitar, lead horn, and what wind instrument is being used and when that group is coming to town, and how much money they will need to get tickets and a new outfit. In essence, OUR CHILDREN ARE BRIGHT; OUR CHILDREN ARE BRILLIANT; OUR CHILDREN CAN LEARN; OUR CHILDREN NEED TO LEARN THE SONG OF SURVIVAL; OUR CHILDREN NEED TO KNOW HOW TO SURVIVE.

Jackson states that children need to be motivated, they need to be cared for, they need to be disciplined and sometimes chastised. Motivation, caring, discipline and chastisement are all part of love and children should be enclosed in a love triangle which includes the home, the school and the church. Children must be taught that they have the responsibility to learn as well as a right to quality education. They can be allowed to play the game of "teach me if you can catch me" or "I dare you to make me learn."

A few of the EXCEL program strategies to improve the atmosphere for quality education are:

I. The schools would take such actions as:

1. Bridge the gap between the community and the school. Careful and repeated explanations, made to the community, of the benefits of a good education, to help develop a self-confident sense of where we are going and how far we have already come, thanks largely to education.
2. Make all reasonable efforts to bring the parent to school to pick up report cards. (explain)
3. Create specific incentives for students and teachers to achieve excellence in the classroom. (explain)
4. Stress dignity, respect, and self discipline among the student body.
5. Recognize students who excel in academics.
6. Establish a city-wide council of students who will provide leadership to support discipline and academic excellence, and resist drugs, violence, and racism.
7. Establish at the secondary level, a system of peer justice, whereby many cases of misconduct would be judged and dealth with by students themselves.

II. The community must initiate action such as:

1. Accepting the challenge and be willing to do much more than is required by law or rules.
2. These responsibilities adopted by the community should be founded upon moral authority and ethics that will complement academic and mental development.

III. The church is a most active partner in the movement and the program calls for the church to:

1. Communicate and cooperate with educators, by providing platforms and scholarships in religious institutions for recognition of excellence in education.
2. Incorporate educational progress and excellence as part of the responsibility of the religious institution, by establishing facilities for studying and tutoring.

What can we do?

Now, I have spent a significant amount of time outlining for you what the PUSH Program for Excellence is. A question for all of us as educators and patrons of schools seems appropriate and obvious at this point, and it is not "Can the PUSH Program for Excellence Succeed?", but should be "How can we as parents, educators, patrons of the community, take action to gain the greatest benefit for our student learners?" In order to respond to that question, six other questions about the program are posed and answered.[9]

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[9] Eubanks and Levine, Op. Cit. p. 385-386.

1. Can the program succeed if it is so highly dependent on the leadership of its charismatic leader? Jesse Jackson is not PUSH, and PUSH is much more than Jesse Jackson. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that most of EXCEL's initial growth can be attributed to Jackson's dynamic and charismatic leadership. It is significant to point out that, even though Jackson has received thus far, all of the publicity, PUSH staff realize that EXCEL's effect on American education cannot have a lasting effect, if predicated solely on Jackson.[10] Most of the proposals being put forward by PUSH have been advocated before by parents, teachers, and others. Let me suggest the following action steps.

   A. Since this is the case, let's dig in and work with what has been done and let the nationally recognized PUSH Program give the PULL to move into real action.

   B. To institutionalize the program, we need resources to employ more personnel to work on a day by day basis to insure adequate implementation of the programs. It is here that it is incumbent upon districts utilizing the program to select the most able personnel for involvement to insure the components of the programs are indeed put in place and that the program not become a paper program as too often occurs in new programs. Districts must selectively embark upon the program in a planned fashion, step by step, and not simply jump on the bandwagon because the burden will be as it should be on the district regardless of the initial involvement of Reverend Jackson.

2. Can Participants in the PUSH Program succeed in keeping their roles discrete and effective? Related to the issue of dependence on

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[10] Robert W. Cole, "Black Moses: Jesse Jackson's PUSH for Excellence," Phi Delta Kappan, 58(January, 1977), p. 380.

inspirational leadership is an important question concerning the degree to which actors in the PUSH scenario can each make their special contribution in a cooperative effort to improve social and physical conditions in the inner city. One of Jackson's main tasks is to articulate what others are not in a position to say persuasively or even to say at all. For example, Jackson was able to persuade more than 30 unemployed residents of one inner-city Chicago neighborhood to volunteer security and supervision around an elementary school which had become dangerous to attend. Since these people were unemployed, he argued, why should they not make a contribution to their community and the welfare of its young people? His suggestion, coming from educators, probably would have been mostly ineffectual; and political leaders probably would have been very hesitant to offer it at all.

By the same token, PUSH leaders recognize that they are dependent on educators for technical expertise in improving instruction once classroom conditions have become more conducive to teaching and learning. At some point in the change process, community pressure will have to be brought to bear on faculties lacking the leadership, skill, or motivation to take advantage of these new opportunities. At that time major clashes may well occur with teacher or administrator unions and other professional associations.

Districts and school personnel must recognize the possibility of the conflict and it is imperative that they form partnerships and coalitions in advance so as to reduce the probability of these conflicts or at least have the power and strength to confront them if the conflicts develop.

3. Will the PUSH Program be perceived as "blaming the victim"? In the past, a number of programs in education and other areas which have attempted

to help improve conditions in inner-city neighborhoods have failed largely or partly because they were perceived by their potential clients as "blaming the victim" for his own troubles. Any program designed to help powerless people help themselves may fail for this reason, because in general people will not participate vigorously in an effort which they think maligns and stigmatizes them.

Districts and schools, given they have credibility, must convince students and the community that self help, neither logically nor practically, is not equivalent to blaming the victim. This task will not be easy and we all must recognize that it needs to be done. But, we also will need to exercise the greatest caution that we do not let other components of our system of economics and government off the hook. We must continue to point out the neglect and inequities in this country during the past, the present and the projected future.

4. Will "practicing" academic subjects yield anything like the same gains which practice may accomplish in sports and physical exercise? The PUSH Program emphasized such practice. Undoubtedly improvement in academic performance among Big City students depends on their spending more time, both inside and outside of class, on mastering academic subject matter. Recent research tends to verify this commonsense notion. Unfortunately, however, it is very uncertain whether more practice and study by themselves would accomplish much. We need improved instructional approaches, to diagnose and overcome the learning difficulties of disadvantaged students. Methods of instruction must be modified so that students are not simply practicing the same mistakes over and over again, as appears to have happened in many after-school or other "add-on" Title I programs.

Jackson and other PUSH leaders recognize that practice in academics is only a part of the solution to achievement problems in big-city schools. They have seized upon the practice-and-study idea because it is easy for parents, students, and others to understand, and because it represents something concrete that big-city residents perhaps can begin to work on immediately. Nevertheless, there are dangers in over-simplifying the learning problem in big-city schools to this degree. It is comparable to the trap some teachers have fallen into when they argue, "They can't learn because they are hungry." Some parents have fallen into it when they say, "If kids aren't learning, it must be because teachers aren't teaching."

Practice may even prove dysfunctional if it turns out that the wrong habits are being repeated, or if students perceive little improvement after practice and still become more alienated. Moreover, overemphasis on this approach makes PUSH highly dependent on the expertise of teachers now in the schools, teachers who presumably will provide appropriate guidance in telling pupils what and how to study.

There are demonstrated instructional approaches and techniques which have been effective in big city schools such as teachers being actively involved with students, well organized and structured learning situations, acknowledgement for accomplishment, and positive supportive feedback when students give incorrect answers or say they do not know the answer. These and other proven techniques must accompany the PUSH Program if success is to be achieved.

5. Is religion too much comingled with the public schools in PUSH's approach to educational reform? If only on civil liberty grounds, there are serious

questions concerning the central role which PUSH advocates for religion and the churches in seeking to re-establish the "moral authority" its leaders believe is prerequisite to substantial academic improvement in big-city schools. PUSH leaders can point out that their program does not require membership in a church or attendance at church services, but the program is built explicityly on commitment to religious principles, and is sometimes expressed, in terms closely reflecting Christian fundamentalism. This may make the PUSH effort at school reform not only vulnerable to legal suits but also repugnant to many potential supporters.

Districts and individual schools must tread a very thin line when they involve religion with schools. Therefore, districts which implement the PUSH Program should use all other optional strategies before imputing religion in any program. I would encourage districts to develop their program, so that any religious component becomes the responsibility of the home.

6. Can the PUSH Program succeed in the face of urban conditions which strongly militate against the success of any organized effort to help the poor and the powerless?

PUSH is attempting to bring about what amounts to a revolution in the way inner-city populations and institutions interact and function, explicitly recognizing that anything short of such a revolution probably will fail in the same manner as many earlier programs. They are placing a lot of faith on possibly weak reeds (e.g., active cooperation on the part of entrenched bureaucracies), and they may be expanding their program too fast and spreading themselves too thin. They argue with much justification that big-city problems in education, social welfare, employment, etc., are national rather than local in origin and scope; and only a comprehensive national effort which reaches directly to the grassroots level of the family and the peer group will have much chance to succeed in local

neighborhoods.

One can not quarrel with the assumption that big-city education is a national problem but districts and schools should question severely whether a program which promises so much, can deliver with so few material resources. Again I say, if you implement the program don't permit other components of our system to continue to neglect to fulfill their responsibilities, i.e., supplantation. We must continue to question, prod, and pressure these agencies and institutions to fulfill their mandates.

Summary and Recommendations

In closing, it should be stated, the PUSH Program for Excellence in Education is built on a solid foundation of socialization theory. It begins with the premise that socialization is most successful when the forces which shape a child's attitudes and behaviors operate in a consistent and unified manner, to communicate beliefs and understandings essential for success in the society of which he is a part. It further emphasizes that parents, neighbors, peers, teachers, church officials, and other adults in the local community who interact personally with children, must work together to develop motivation and habits which can enable the child to succeed in society's major institutions.[11]

The weakest element in the PUSH plan probably involves its relatively slight emphasis on the problems likely to arise in improving curriculum and instruction, once big-city schools have been made better places in which to teach and learn. I am not as skeptical, about PUSH's societal analysis and overall strategy as I am about its pedagogy.[12] With regards to proposals for change in curriculum and instruction or to analysis of reforms needed in school organization and administration, PUSH is mostly silent.

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[11] Eubanks and Levine, Op. Cit., p. 386.

[12] Ibid.

Thus the PUSH Program poses an enormous challenge to teachers and administrators in big-city schools. Jesse Jackson asserts that he believes teachers do know how to teach if students are attentive and motivated; after all, most teachers have had considerable preparation and experience. "I am confident," he states "that educators have the technology", and he also expressed the belief that many administrators have the "presence," the know-how, and the determination to organize their schools for more effective instruction if parents demand and support such changes.[13]

I wish I shared this confidence. Too many educators in general have been negligent. Failing to try or to properly implement promising new instructional approaches, most teachers are neither prepared nor experienced in working with methods that might improve academic performance in big-city schools. Even if students and parents "cooperate" fully with previously harassed and harried teachers and administrators, this says in effect, "the emperor may be shown to be virtually naked."[14]

If the movement is to contribute to a lasting improvement in big-city schools, it must incorporate specific and systematic school-wide plans for change in curriculum and methods of instruction. Serious efforts toward big-city school reform must include:

1. appointment of outstanding administrative leadership at every level, i.e., principal, middle management, and the superintendency.
2. A greater emphasis on staff development than in the past, carried out intensively on a school-by-school, administrator-by-administrator and teacher-by-teacher basis, with far greater input from the community.
3. A thorough analysis and if indicated, a systematic process of reorganizing traditional school practices, including scheduling, student/teacher

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[13] Ibid. p. 387.

[14] Ibid.

relationships, grouping of student learners, evaluation practices, and utilization of instructional methods and materials.

4. More provisions for different educational environments for students who cannot function well in regular schools.
5. Community resources joined to school resources in order to insure that both are fully utilized.

The program is not without its proponents and opponents, as was indicated by a series of published articles in the November, 1978 issue of Phi Delta Kappan. The sentiment among some of the prominent black educators in America, ranges from system change, to mildly criticized program policies, to alternatives and imperatives, to the basic philosophy of EXCEL. However, if education is a "powerful and economic weapon," it must be pointed out that the efforts by Jackson has assisted oppressed peoples in re-directing their energies toward further educational attainment.

In summation as educators and patrons of big-city schools, our charge is to utilize this opportunity granted to us by the PUSH for Excellence Program, and whether it succeeds or not is dependent upon our actions. Sizemore (1979) provides her commentary on EXCEL, in her statment that:

> Perhaps the significance of EXCEL is that it has brought a diverse section of black America together to talk about education. Maybe out of this meeting a cadre of workers will develop to bring about the kind of change Woodson discussed in 1933, toward which the black studies movement was directed in 1966, and to which Arnez, Green, Proctor, Ray and Watson referred to in 1978. If this happens, EXCEL will have indeed succeeded.[15]

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[15] Barbara A. Sizemore, "PUSH Politics and the Education of America's Youth," Phi Delta Kappan, 60(January, 1979), p. 369.